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THE DARK TOWER ~THE GUNSLINGER~



THE WAY STATION

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PREVIOUSLY...

Roland Deschain is the last gunslinger of the line of Arthur Eld. His quest is the pursuit of the elusive Man in Black, and he will not stop until he brings him to the Dark Tower.

His travels have taken him to many strange places, most recently Tull, a town whose residents Roland was forced to kill to stay alive as they attacked him en masse.

Now, as he crosses the endless Mohaine desert, the gunslinger believes he has sighted the Man in Black. But that may only have been an illusion, as the exhausted Roland collapses not at the feet of his quarry but at those of a boy brandishing a pitchfork...

The boy is John, or Jake Chambers, who tells Roland that a priest did pass through a short time ago. Upon questioning, Jake reveals that he doesn't know how he came to be in Mid-World. He tells Roland that on another Earth he was pushed in front of a car and killed by someone who may have been the Man in Black. Jake then found himself in Mid-World.

Roland and Jake prepare to set out again, first checking the cellar for supplies. A voice from the wall tells Roland that "While you travel with the boy, the Man in Black travels with your soul in his pocket." He pulls a jawbone from the wall and keeps it, then leaves for the mountains.



Roland and Jake are three days out of the way station; the mountains are deceptively clear now.

For the first time in months or years the gunslinger can see real, living green.

Jake is fine on the trail. Tough, but more than that, he don't ask questions, which the gunslinger appreciates and admires.

The fact that Jake is not slowing him down only opens the way to more sinister possibilities.

See there. Grass, dwarf spruces, even willows, all fed by the snow runoff from further up.

Beyond that, the rock takes over again, all the way to the blinding snowcaps.

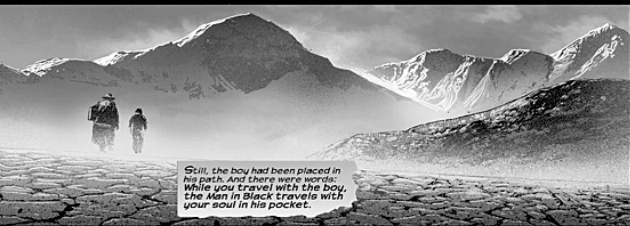
...it's beautiful.

In my experience, beauty is what lures you in before it kills you.

When your fingers and toes are turning blue from the cold of the ice and snow, it may well have less pulchritude.

Pulchri-what now?





Still, the boy had been placed in his path. And there were words: While you travel with the boy, the Man in Black travels with your soul in his pocket.



And that huge slash? That canyon? Leads to smaller, eroded sandstone cliffs and mesas and buttes on the other side.

Only canyons I ever saw were the concrete ones in New York. This is...



I'm simply saying it's not too late for you to go back to--

To what? An empty house on the corner of no and where? Screw that.



Let's hit the ice mountains, Aragorn.

What did you call me?
Never mind.



It's not an obsession. It's a *quest*.

Why can't it be both?

Obsessions are bad. They hurt people. Quests are good and help people.

Huh. It's nice to be young and have such a clear vision of the world.

Do you remember this?

I remember it's a *bullet*.

Yar. When I was your age, I lived in a walled city.

Did I tell you that?

Sure. And there was an evil man. A priest...

A Wizard, named Marten. Like Merlin. Do they ken Merlin where you come from?

Yar. Merlin and the knights of...

.....

"Hosken" is what some call what Roland just did. Others say "hypnosis."

Many would call it magic.



Magic. Wizards. A lot for a simple gunslinger to deal with.

The priest. The evil man. Sometimes I wonder about that, tell you true, Jake.

If they were two, I think now they must have been brothers. Maybe even twins.



But did I ever see 'em together? No, I never did.

Perhaps there's more of them out there I've yet to encounter.

And only *one* of me to stand against them.

Or maybe there's countless versions of *me* as well. Maybe one day there will be an *army* of me standing against an army of *them*...



Arrayed across a vast plain in such numbers that we blot out the horizon.

And it all ends there, in the shadow of the Dark Tower.

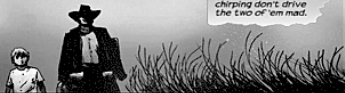
That would be a *good* day.

I would like that day *very* much.

One day rolls into another. An alternate path miraculously unveils itself, enabling them to bypass the coldest parts of the passage, although snowcaps yet await them.

Assuming the damned chirping don't drive the two of 'em mad.

There remains a chill in the air, but more vegetation is making its presence felt. Witchgrass and dwarf spruces grow, and crickets are chirping, hinting of more life and perhaps better hunting.



Your eyes are starting to look glazed. Prink this.

Isn't that the last of the water?



For the moment. But moments pass.

Close your eyes...not for sleep this time. Listen.



Listen to what? I don't...

Wait.



I hear... water! A stream nearby!



Pay attention to the world and it'll take care of you.



Here. I left you some...

Just in case the stream's filthy or something.

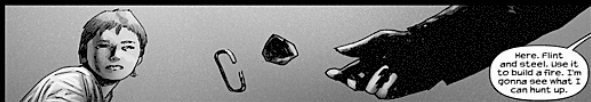


Good point.









Truth to tell, death in that manner might be a blessing when ya consider what happened to all the others that fell into Roland's orbit.

Burned, stabbed, shot...the list goes on and on.



And don't think for a minute that that ain't weighing on the gunslinger every minute that he's with Jake. He wears a sense of impending sorrow like others do coats.



All things considered, a brief pinch on the neck followed by a permanent sleep...ain't so bad on comparison, do ya kenneit?



Ah.



Suppertime.





Three quick shots later, Roland says the worst thing he possibly could:

That was easy.

Ya think he'd have knowed better than to tempt dark forces that way.



What was that?

Who touched me on the shoulder just now?

I felt as though there was some sort of ill-magic around here. I'd hoped I was mistaken.



He waits all patient-like, but nothing presents itself.

So he starts hacking loose some vines, with the intent of plaiting them into ropes after dinner. Rope's always handy.



But accidentally cutting yourself while doing so, well...that's bad.



And doing it while vampiric suckerbats are about?



Much worse.







Roland sleeps then and, as always, we ken what haunts him because of the words he mutters.



He's watching, his arms held by two villagers on each side, his neck dog-caught in a huge, rusty iron collar.

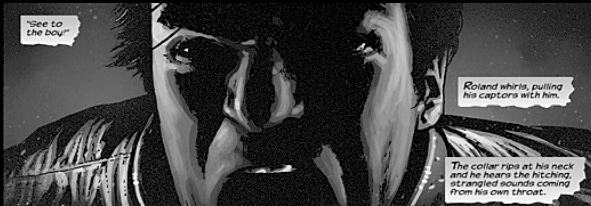


And Susan Delgado is dying her thousandth death in his head. He can smell her burning hair, can hear the cries of the Charyou tree.



But there's something else this time. Susan screaming not, "Roland, I love thee," but instead, "The boy! Roland, the boy!"

"See to the boy!"



Roland whirrs, pulling his captors with him.

The collar rips at his neck and he hears the hitching, strangled sounds coming from his own throat.

There is a sickish-sweet
smell of barbecuing meat
in the air, and in the
distance...

...the Park Tower, looming,
as it always does. But this
time, Jake is looking out
from a window.

He looks like a statue of
an alabaster saint
in a cathedral. His
eyes are marble.

A spike has been
driven through
his forehead.

The gunslinger feels
the strangling, ripping
scream that signaled
the beginning of his
lunacy pull up from the
bottom of his belly.



Quickly the reality of things untangles from his tortured dreamings.

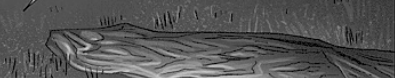


The burning smell: Roland singled his hand, and a rabbit pelt fell into the fire.

He clutches the former while stamping out the latter.



Jake?



Off urinating? Or was Susan trying to warn him...?

A strangled wordless cry from the willow jungle--that shapeless "Nnnnn" sound--answers that question.



A bitter circle of moon has risen and he follows the boy's track in the dew.



He ducks under the first of the willows, splashing through the spring, skidding in the dampness.





The trees are thicker here, and the moon is blotted out.



Half-rotted dead branches reach for his shins, his *cojones*.

He pauses for a moment, lifting his head and scenting at the air. A ghost of a breeze helps him.

The gunslinger's nostrils flare like those of an ape. The younger, lighter odor of the boy's sweat is faint, oily, unmistakable.



Willow wreaths slap at his face. Woods strikes his shoulders like flabby corpse-hands.

Some cling in sighing gray tendrils.



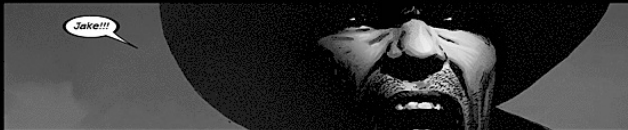
He claws through a last barricade of willows and comes to a clearing that looks up at the stars and the highest peak of the range...

...gleaming skull-white at an impossible altitude.



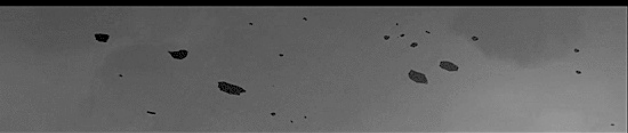
The boy stands before it--before the spirit of the Oracle, this succubus--trembling back and forth, his hands shaking at his side as if filled with static electricity.

Only that same "nnnnn" in response. And then a voice, spoken but silent, fills him.



Jake!!!







Here he is,
Roland. Come
and get him.



That's it.
That's it. Now
answer truly...



Am I not
more beautiful
than all women
you've loved put
together?



Y-yes...

Feel fear
and terror
at war with
excruciating
pleasure.

Feel your
loins fill with
light. Feel your
head twisting, your
tongue thickening,
sensitive even to
the spittle that
coats it.



Feel my
spirit touch
you, and ask
yourself: Of
what use is a
cold, dark
tower...

...when what
you truly need
is warmth and
light, forever
and always
within me.



SPEAKING RINGS



Every archeologist knows that landscapes are like old vellum manuscripts. Each era wipes away what came before in order to write its own tale upon the page. The past is scraped away, knocked down, bulldozed over, or left to collapse and overgrow with bracken and weeds. For most of us, this obliteration seems complete, yet to those who have eyes to see it the ancient past can still be read in the topography of the earth, in the diverted paths of riverbeds, or in the arrangements of old stones.

Mid-World, like our world, has a complex history, and that history has left its scars upon the landscape. The greatest of Mid-World's wounds were caused by the Great Old Ones, those technologically advanced people who poisoned Mid-World's air,

soil, and water. The deadly weapons revived by John Farson were created by that ancient race, as were the electronic and atomic equipment stamped with the emblem of North Central Positronics. Mid-World's many mutants were created by the fallout of the Great Old Ones' wars, and the Dogans—those laboratories where magic and technology can be merged—were their creations.

But the Great Old Ones were not the only people to rule Mid-World before the rise of Roland's ancestor, Arthur Eld. Hundreds, or perhaps thousands of years before Gilead was built upon the ruins of one of the Great Old Ones' cities, a more primitive folk were erecting their own memorials upon the land. And though these Old People knew nothing about electricity, gasoline powered engines, or atomic weaponry, their primitive technology was just as deadly as anything that came later.

Mid-World's first people were great architects and great magicians. Their stone circles, also called Speaking Rings or Druit Stones, can be found all over Mid-World's landscape. In these demonic places, the boundaries between the visible and invisible worlds are thin, and spirits and oracles are plentiful. Although we don't know the names of the



tribes who made those monoliths point skyward, we do know that their religion was brutal. Speaking Rings were originally places of worship, but they were also places of human sacrifice, where Mid-World's earliest inhabitants gave blood and flesh to ancient death gods.

At the end of this month's installment of our tale, Jake Chambers stumbles into one of the Old People's stone circles. This ring is located in a willow jungle, high in the foothills of the Cyclopean Mountains. As in the original novel, the first hint we have that all is not right in this lush and verdant place comes while Roland is filling waterskins near a lily pond. As he dips one of his waterbags into a spring, he becomes aware of a strange sensuality stirring within him. At first he thinks this sensual awakening is sparked by the leafy abundance of the jungle after trekking through the sterility of the desert, but readers already suspect that some kind of *glammer* is working upon Roland's consciousness. Only a few moments later (in our present version of the tale) our gunslinger is attacked by deadly vampiric suckerbats. With his usual skill, Roland shoots the bloodsuckers, but these vermin foreshadow the horrors to come. Something evil haunts this place.

Night falls, and Roland assumes that he and Jake are safe in their camp. But while Roland is sleeping, his highly developed sixth sense warns him that danger lurks nearby. Roland dreams that he is back in Hambry, witnessing the sacrifice of his first love, Susan Delgado, upon a Charyou tree fire. His neck is shackled by a huge, rusty iron collar, and two villagers clutch his arms. Horrified, Roland watches as Susan burns. The villagers throw corn husks at her as they chant, and Roland can smell the terrible



stench of his beloved's smoldering hair and flaming flesh. But when Susan cries out, she does not beg for mercy or for aid. Instead, she tries to warn our hero that something terrible is happening in the waking world. "THE BOY!" She screams. "ROLAND, THE BOY!" Roland whirls around, dragging his captors with him. High above them, staring down at the scene of sacrifice from a window of the Dark Tower, is Jake. Only Jake's face is that of an alabaster saint, and a spike has been driven through his forehead.

Roland wakes with a start. The smell of burning flesh is real enough. In his flailing nightmare, he singsed his hand. Roland glances around, but cannot see Jake anywhere.



And then he hears Jake's distant, strangled voice. "Nnnnnnnnn!" It is as if the boy is trying to speak but cannot.

Roland takes off at a run. He splashes through the pond where he drew water and then dashes through the dense willow jungle. Moss strikes him like flaggy corpse hands and willow withies claw at his

skin. Finally, he breaks into a clearing dominated by a circle of black standing stones. At the center of the ring, an altar rises out of the ground on a thick arm of black basalt. It is large enough to hold a sacrificed man. Jake stands before the altar; he is swaying back and forth and his hands shake at his sides as if they are infused with static electricity. Before



him is the shimmering shape of a woman.

Crying Jake's name, Roland steps inside the circle of stones. Jake throws up his hands and stumbles backwards, once again moaning a stifled negation: "Nnnnn!" But now Roland can *feel* the presence of the circle demon. His loins fill with light, and his tongue thickens. Even as he senses the changes in his body, Roland realizes what is happening. Jake has been snared

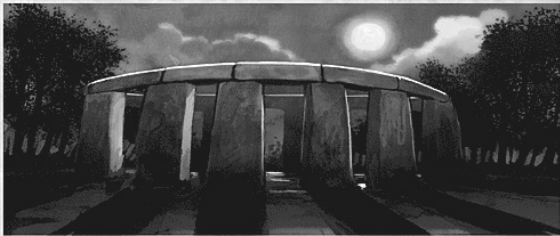
by a succubus—one of the ancient oracle-demons that Mid-World's Old People trapped in stone circles so that they could cajole them into speaking prophecy. Such creatures can predict the future, but their utterances always come at a terrible price.

As Roland stands between Jake and the oracle, the oracle takes on the form of Susan Delgado and reaches out to embrace him. Luckily for Roland, his gunslinger reflexes react though his mind is numbed. Reaching into his pocket, Roland withdraws the speaking demon's jawbone which he found in the Way Station's cellar wall. Roland thrusts the bone forward, and the succubus's body shifts from beauty to horror.

"BEGONE!" Roland cries, but the skeletal, fanged succubus lunges at him. Covering Jake's prostrate body, Roland continues to ward off his demonic enemy. "BEGONE!" He cries again. But will he succeed in driving off this demon? The answer can be found in next month's issue of THE WAY STATION!

Until next month, long days and pleasant nights!

Robin Furth



ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE HANS

ART EVOLUTION

Dark Tower – The Way Station #4 – Page 7

1. Carrying their empty waterskins, Roland and Jake have just turned one corner and are now turning another. There, before them, is a small waterfall which cascades into a still pool.

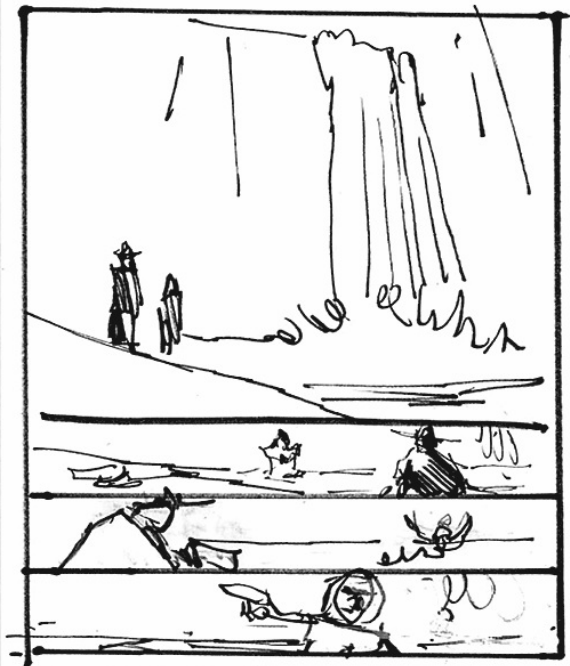
Though this pool in turn drains down the rocks into another, smaller waterfall, the pool is calm enough for Jake to swim. Jake cries "HURRAH!" He asks Roland if he can swim. Roland says yes.

2. Jake has shed his clothes. (We see them at the edge of the pool). Perhaps he is about waist-deep in the water? He shivers a little. He tells Roland that the water is cold. Roland tells him to get out then. "No way!" Jake replies.

3. Roland fills up the waterskins from the waterfall while Jake splashes happily in the water. He is doing backstroke, and Roland comments that Jake is a good swimmer. Jake says that he took lessons at school.

4. Jake has now stopped swimming. He is standing in the water and is pointing upwards. Roland is following the trajectory of Jake's finger which points up past the rise of the green plain to the naked and flashing cliffs and gorges above it . . . not far from the snowcap itself. Faint and far, nothing but a tiny dot (It might have been a mote dancing before his eyes) Roland beholds the Man in Black, making his way up the slopes with a deadly progress, like a minuscule fly on a huge granite wall.

THUMBNAILS BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL



INKS BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL



COLORS BY RICHARD ISANOVE



COVER INKS FOR THE WAY STATION #4 BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL



NEXT: "THREE IS THE NUMBER OF THY FATE."





The Man in Black flees across the desert with the gunslinger Roland in close pursuit. But is it all an illusion? Barely escaping the sleepy little town of Tull with his life and leaving a pile of bodies behind him, Roland has arrived at the Way Station exhausted and dehydrated. It is there that he meets Jake Chambers, a boy from another Earth where cars roam streets and clothes are sold on mannequins. But how did Jake get there and what is his connection to the mysterious Man in Black? Roland and Jake set off together, continuing the ever treacherous journey towards the Dark Tower to find the Man in Black and make Mid-World right again.

From the superstar creative team of Robin Furth, Peter David, Richard Isanove, and Laurence Campbell comes a brand-new story in the saga of the last gunslinger. Superbly mixing fantasy, horror, revenge, and betrayal, a story like this could only come from the mind of master storyteller Stephen King.

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